CHAPTER 2

The Life and Career of Frederick Cornes

I

Frederick Cornes’ lineage can be accurately traced back to the eighteenth century when his grandfather was a tenant farmer at Hall O’Heath, near Haslington in Cheshire. William Corns [sic] was a respected member of this community and served as a churchwarden at Barthomley parish church. His marriage to Mary Brockley in 1799 was followed by the birth of a son in 1805. This was John Corns and although the family were in a relatively comfortable position at some stage it was decided that the growing silk industry at nearby Macclesfield offered him a better future.

As a result John moved to the town and obtained employment at Park Mill operated by Messrs. H. & T. Wardle. After learning the trade as a weaver John showed an aptitude for design and was later able to concentrate upon this aspect of the business. He subsequently became the firm’s manager and by the time of his death in 1855 was reported to be a partner in the enterprise.

Soon after arriving in Macclesfield John married Ellen Wilshaw who had been his next door neighbour. Her father was also employed in the silk industry as an operative and her brother, George Dooley Wilshaw, was to become manager of Wardles before successfully setting up on his own account. With this background it is not surprising that both of John and Ellen’s sons were to follow careers in the same activity.

The eldest of these was William Wilshaw Cornes who was born in 1826. The slight change in surname gradually adopted by John Corns’ children should be noted – see below, p.54 (f/n 2). Having inherited his father’s feeling for art William attended the Useful Knowledge Society’s drawing classes in Macclesfield. There he proved to be so successful that in 1840 he secured a one-term scholarship at the London School of Design. This in turn enabled him to join Wardles as a designer and he was to spend the whole of his career at the Park Mills. However, his progress was such that when the Wardle brothers retired he was able to take over the firm and it was then reconstituted as W.W. Cornes and Company. By the time of his death in 1885, the enterprise
had been renamed Cornes and Johnson, and William was described as one of the leading silk manufacturers of the town.\textsuperscript{2}

John Corns’ other son was Frederick born in 1837. He was educated at Macclesfield Grammar School (now Kings School) and also attended classes at the U.K.S. and was awarded a prize for his drawing in 1848–49. After leaving school in 1852, he then followed what was becoming something of a family tradition and spent some time learning the basics of the silk industry. At this stage it is clear that Frederick could have developed a rewarding career in Macclesfield with either his elder brother or his uncle.\textsuperscript{3} However, perhaps demonstrating the independent spirit which was later to characterize many of his later business activities, he decided to follow an alternative course of action.

Thus it was that in 1857 Frederick Cornes moved to Manchester and joined the firm of Holliday Wise and Company as a silk buyer. After a brief period of training, during which he was introduced to its personnel and methods, he travelled out to Shanghai to act as one of its representatives. His new duties inevitably brought him into contact with the buyers from many other expatriate firms and he quickly gained a reputation as a shrewd and knowledgeable agent. These activities provided Frederick with an appreciation of the wider background to the trade and in due course this prompted him to make a highly significant change to his career.

As noted earlier, the European silk manufacturing industry was traditionally based in France and Northern Italy.\textsuperscript{4} Although these areas originally produced much of their own raw material the expansion of output in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries meant that more and more raw silk needed to be imported from Southern Italy and the Middle East. The further growth in demand then led to the development of a long-distance trade with Asia and by the 1840s China had emerged as the principal supplier. It was for this reason that Holliday Wise and Company had established a branch at Shanghai and the outbreak of the pebrine disease in the Mediterranean during the 1850s further increased the demand for Chinese silk.

This was, of course, one of the reasons which encouraged the firm to expand its operations and appoint Frederick Cornes. The situation was not, however, quite as promising as it appeared for the long-running Tai’ping War was beginning to damage a number of the silk producing areas. By 1860, this conflict was starting to threaten the Shanghai region and this may well have been an important factor in Frederick’s decision to consider his position with Holliday Wise. Of even greater significance, perhaps, was his knowledge of the opening of a number of Japanese ports for foreign trade and his belief that these would provide profitable opportunities for those who were prepared to take the necessary risks. Accordingly, after much careful consideration, he resigned from the Manchester firm and early in 1861 made his way to Yokohama.

\textbf{II}

Little is known of Cornes’ journey from Shanghai and of his arrival in Yokohama. However, it is certain that the voyage was made by sailing vessel